

**Testimony to the House Committee on Education and Labor**

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman and distinguished committee members for inviting me to testify before the House Committee on Education and Labor. I am pleased to represent KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) and our parents, students, and staff. I appreciate the opportunity to talk about the need for common standards in the United States, as it is an issue that I have thought about a great deal as an educator and co-founder of a national public charter school network.

I want to begin by describing my experience in starting KIPP and explain why I am passionate about raising expectations for all children. In 1992, I started in education as a teacher in a Houston public elementary school through Teach For America. As a new teacher, I was surprised to see how little guidance I received about what to do in my classroom. I struggled to use the textbooks I was given as they only worked for the handful of students who were already motivated and performing on grade level. Another Teach For America teacher in Houston, Mike Feinberg, found himself in the same frustrated situation.

Determined to be successful as teachers, we sought out the ‘master teachers’ in our respective schools and hounded them relentlessly to teach us what they knew about lesson planning and implementation. We knew our students would be assessed on the Texas standardized test and that seemed important, but ultimately we were concerned that our students would learn the content — math and reading skills — they needed to thrive in the grades ahead.

Drawing on what we learned from these master teachers about how to motivate students, we started KIPP as an alternative program with 50 fifth graders at Garcia Elementary school in Houston. In 1995, KIPP became a public school in Houston and, while Mike stayed in Houston to be its principal, I went to New York City to start KIPP Academy in the South Bronx. Both KIPP Academies soon became the highest performing schools in their respective communities.

Based on the success of these first two schools, KIPP began to grow. There are currently 66 KIPP schools serving 16,000 students in 19 states and the District of Columbia. By this summer, there will be over 80 KIPP schools in operation, and by 2011, 100 KIPP schools will be open across the country.

KIPP schools are open-enrollment public schools and all but one are public charter schools. Over 80 percent of KIPP students qualify for free or reduced price meals, 63 percent are African American, and 33 percent are Hispanic/Latino. KIPP started by establishing public middle schools, but we have now grown to open high schools and pre-K/elementary schools.

KIPP has grown because our schools are producing results that prove that demography need not define destiny. According to test score data gathered in 2008, KIPP students start fifth grade at KIPP schools scoring on average at the 41<sup>st</sup> percentile in math and the 31<sup>st</sup> percentile in English language arts. By the end of eighth grade, they score at the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile in math and the 58<sup>th</sup> percentile in English language arts. Of the students that have completed eighth grade with KIPP,

85 percent have matriculated to college, a rate more than four times the national average for similar students.

When the KIPP network reaches 100 fully grown schools, it will serve the same number of students as the public school district in Atlanta, Georgia. And yet, as a national network the lack of common standards makes it difficult to gauge how well KIPP is meeting its ultimate goal: preparing all of our students with the character and academic skills for success, self-sufficiency, and happiness in college and in life.

Currently, states set their own standards and determine how hard or easy it will be for students to pass. The result? We have passing hurdles that are very high in some states and close to the ground in others. According to Education Next, which reviews the rigor of state standards each year, only three states—Massachusetts, South Carolina, and Missouri—have established world class standards in reading and math. Some states, like Georgia and Tennessee, have established such mediocre expectations that nearly every student is considered to be on grade level.

With states held accountable for meeting the standards they set, there's an unfortunate incentive for states to set the bar low. It's just too easy for states to take advantage of the system using this strategy. In Texas, for example, 75 percent of schools were deemed to have made Adequate Yearly Progress in 2008, with more than 80 percent of high school students passing state reading and ELA assessments. And yet, according to a study by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, only 43 percent of high school students in Texas are graduating with college-ready transcripts.

I share this with you not to blame specific states, but only to illuminate the challenges posed by our current approach. Given the current patchwork of state standards, KIPP has chosen to require that all of our schools also administer a national, norm-referenced assessment in addition to the state assessments their students must take. Using data from this assessment, KIPP schools can compare performance and readily share what is working.

And let me emphasize the importance of this last point. As a founder of a high performing national network, perhaps most frustrating is to see the ways in which the maze of state standards and tests keeps great teachers from sharing ideas, inhibits innovation, and prevents meaningful comparison of student, teacher and school performance. In sum, we are not only creating a system in which academic performance means fundamentally different things in different states, we are also creating a system in which little can be learned or shared.

However, common national standards will only be useful if they are fewer, clearer, and higher. We need to be careful not to replicate the vast and vague standards we see in too many states today. The standards should be identified based on proven evidence of what is necessary for students to know and do in order to succeed in college and in work. Most importantly, these focused common standards should be something that teachers can teach and students can understand and master.

To be clear, common standards and assessments will not be the silver bullet for all the challenges that are facing our nation's public schools. At KIPP, we have learned that running great schools

requires remarkable principals and teachers, sustained dedication, hard work, and an attention to detail that no one policy or program alone can ensure. When it comes down to it, the presence of top quality teachers in the classroom continues to be the most important ingredient in promoting student achievement. That being said, common standards and assessments would be one of the best ways of maximizing the effectiveness of all of teachers and principals.

KIPP schools are held to high standards but they are free to meet those standards using the curriculum, instruction, and teaching tools that are most effective for their students. KIPP's success across 19 states is not only opening doors of opportunity for kids, but also creating a ripple effect in the larger public school system. High common standards for all students would provide a call to action for all public schools across the United States.

Before the Civil War, when talking about our country people would say, "The United States are..." After, it became "The United States is..." It is time that we do the same in education and adopt one set of common standards.

Thank you Mr. Chairman and committee members for your time and consideration